

**Song Exploder**  
**CHVRCHES - Clearest Blue**  
**Episode 76**

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

Hrishikesh: I interviewed the Scottish band CHVRCHES back in March 2016 in Austin, Texas. A few weeks ago, in May 2018, they released a new album called *Love Is Dead*. It features contributions from David Stewart of the Eurythmics and another past Song Exploder guest Matt Berninger of The National. So in honor of CHVRCHES' new record, I wanted to go back and listen to their episode again. Here it is.

*("Clearest Blue" by CHVRCHES)*

Hrishikesh: CHVRCHES is a trio from Glasgow, Scotland. In this episode, they break down the song "Clearest Blue," from their sophomore album *Every Open Eye*. You'll hear the band's original demo as well as why they start songs with a set of rules, but then quickly abandon those rules. This interview was recorded live at the Dropbox Podcast Studio at South by Southwest.

*("Clearest Blue" by CHVRCHES)*

*(Music fades)*

Martin: I'm Martin, and I play keys and stuff.

Lauren: I'm Lauren, and I sing.

Iain: I'm Iain, and I also play keys and stuff.

*(Audience laughter)*

*(Synth)*

Martin: We were trying to make a laid back song, weren't we? We, we, honestly, I swear. I swear.

*(Audience laughter)*

Iain: That's the thing about this band though, we always like set out with rules, and then we were useless at sticking to them. Like the other rule for this song was "Let's do a song with two chords," and, of course, 10 minutes later, Martin's off on another, [chuckles] you know, with the minor.

*(Synth)*

Iain: But we were terrible at sticking to rules, but that's, you know, that's the fun part, is like creating boundaries, and then smashing them, you know?

Martin: You have these reference points and "rules," as Iain says, and they're a great place to start in the creative process, a really important thing to have a, "Today we're going to try and achieve x, y, z."

Lauren: And then, you start to try and do it, and it doesn't quite work out where you plan,

Iain: Yeah.

Lauren: but then you've got a different idea, and then, that's where you take the song to.

Iain: It's a useful jumping off point. Like,

Martin: Mmm.

Lauren: Yes.

Iain: you know, it always gets rid of the whole, you know, the kind of blank page syndrome, where you're just like, "Eurgh, don't know what to do."

*(Beat joins)*

Hrishikesh: So the rules were to make a laid back song with only two chords?

Martin: Yeah.

Iain: Right..

Lauren: It went well.

Iain: [laughter]

*(Audience laughter)*

Martin: [laughter]

*(Synth with beat)*

*(Beat)*

*(Beat ends)*

Martin: The very first thing is actually, it made the final record, you can still sort of hear it, it's like a vocal sample. Kind of goes [mimics vocal sample sound].

*(Vocal sample sound)*

Martin: Runs all the way through the whole song.

*(Synth)*

*(Keyboard)*

Martin: That riff itself, the keyboard was, it's two notes. You know, it's just octaves, just trying to write a really irritating riff.

Iain: [laughter]

Martin: Like really percussive, and not so, less emphasis on melody, and really focused on the interplay of rhythm. And as long as you've got like a hi-hat holding that down,

*(Hi-hat joins)*

Martin: being really, really rudimental and really straight, you can dance around the beat, and it becomes a bit lighter and a bit more fun.

*(Beat joins)*

*(Music fades)*

Iain: After the kind of basic track is down, like the chords or the, or a beat, or like a sample loop, or whatever, is that we'll kind of like bounce ideas around between each other. Just like kind of singing at each other, that sort of thing. And then, really quickly, the bones of the melody starts to emerge, and then Martin kind of pulls it together a bit, and like puts down a track of his own vocals, just kind of singing nonsense, just kind of silly words, so that don't mean anything. And that kind of defines the kind of vocal phrasing and, you know, the basic shapes that end up in the final track.

*(Demo vocals, synth, and beat)*

Martin: That stuff is the first thing that comes into my head. Lauren really takes it to the next level.

Lauren: Well, I just go, I take that demo, and I go across the hall to write lyrics while those guys work on the music. So either I'll look through a notebook to try and find words that I've written, or sometimes there'll be a certain word that sounds like Martin said, and then that's what I'll write off of. In the verse of the demo of Martin's vocal, there's a bit where it sounds like he's saying, "Like I always do."

*(Vocals, synth, and beat: "Like I always do")*

Lauren: And then, I was like, "Oh," and then I was like that bit should repeat. Those two lines should come in couples every time in the verse. And that's kind of how that bit started. "Like it always was, like it always was," and then, "It's not enough, not enough."

*(Vocals: "Like it always was / Like it always was / But it's not enough, it's not enough / Not enough")*

Lauren: It's kind of interesting, sometimes I'm like, "This is my poetry I've written." And they're like, "Yes, but that vowel sound and that doesn't fit or this isn't as percussive as it should be." So sometimes using the guide that's in there to think about the shape of the words and things like that. Like what they sound like sonically is helpful because I always go for what the meaning is, and it's helpful, I think the important thing for us is tying those two things together; you want it to mean something, but you want it to fit percussively and melodically as well.

Martin: The marriage of those things is absolutely everything. Like that's what a hook is, where those things meet; percussion, melody, and sentiment.

*(Vocals: "Whenever I feel it coming on, you can be well aware / If ever I try to push away, you can just keep me there / So please say you'll meet me / Meet me halfway")*

Lauren: I think at the time I thought I was writing a love song. I guess I have a tendency towards negativity and a kind of depressive nature sometimes. And I guess I often worry about how that affects my personal relationships or people around you. And, you know, if you're trying to figure out those kinds of things, you don't realize sometimes it's really unpleasant to be around and, or you're just imagining it's unpleasant to be around, and you're projecting that on other people. So I guess for me, I kind of was thinking about, you know, how people receive that is what that is meant to me, I think. And then just hoping, crossing your fingers, that it doesn't make too much of a mess. When I was writing it, it was kind of coming from the standpoint of wanting to believe in something, and wanting to believe that it can be so, but not being sure if the surrounding circumstances will allow that to happen. To me, the phrase "we are tied to the shifting ground," is like circumstances constantly changing.

*(Vocals: "Tied, to the shifting ground / Like it always was")*

Lauren: I was trying to be hopeful, and [laughter] it didn't

*(Audience laughter)*

Lauren: necessarily come out like that. But I guess to me that's, I like those kinds of things that have light and dark in them. That's the stuff that connects with me because it feels more authentic, you know? Rather than writing, "Oh my God, isn't it amazing? We all have these amazing people in our lives, and everything's awesome." And I guess I was a lot more aware on the second record of how I want to communicate with my voice, I think. Weirdly I found hand actions are very helpful to me for singing, and I didn't really think about it that much until I realized for certain parts of songs I do a lot of pointing. For certain parts, I do kind of like chop actions,

*(Audience laughter)*

Lauren: and there's a lot of fist clenching. Or if I'm trying to do high things, I'll, for some reason, put two hands on my stomach to, I guess, remind myself that I'm supposed to be like going from the diaphragm.

*(Vocals: "Shaped by clearest blue")*

Martin: That is the climax of the song there, but the vocal approach is not trying to be super climactic and like punch the air, you know? It's dramatic in the lyrical content, the whole thing becomes more frantic and more frenetic. At the climactic section, it's more like a moment of rest.

*(Vocals: "Shaped (Will you keep it half-a-way?) by clearest blue (Will you keep it half-a-way?) / Shaped (Will you keep it half-a-way?) by clearest blue (Will you keep it half-a-way?)")*

Lauren: There you go! Song Exploded.

*(Audience laughter)*

Martin: Thank you.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Clearest Blue," by CHVRCHES, in its entirety.

*("Clearest Blue" by CHVRCHES)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more info on CHVRCHES, including a link to buy this track.

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